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| DATE | 8 th October 2015 |
| Circulation | 4,600,000 |

THE HUFFINGTON POST



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Is Unconscious Bias Holding You Back?

Posted: 08/10/2015 12:04 BST | Updated: 7 minutes ago

Everyone likes to think he or she is open-minded and objective, but unconscious bias affects every area of our lives. Unconsciously, we are more inclined to like people who have similar looks, similar interests and come from similar backgrounds. Our values and beliefs, which are ingrained from family, culture and a lifetime of experiences heavily influence how we view and evaluate both others and ourselves.

For survival, these biases can be the difference between life and death; thought patterns and assumptions we have accumulated throughout our lifetimes allow us to process information efficiently and with speed. Unconscious bias is triggered in 30 to 100 milliseconds, while conscious thinking takes three to 10 times as long.

However, in the workplace they can be costly. They can cloud judgement and result in missed opportunities.

This is particularly problematic within industries that lean toward a certain type of person as these biases are hard to shift. For example, 43 per cent of newspaper columnists went to public school. A private schooling therefore furnishes aspiring young writers with an experience that makes them more appealing to potential employers. The circumstances they are born into set them down a path that is not so smooth for those educated elsewhere, because unconsciously, those in power want to work with people like themselves.

Unconscious bias may also be an issue in the rail industry. Last time it was surveyed, just 18 per cent of the workforce was found to be female, arguably because the industry suffers from an image problem of a male dominated sector which makes it not immediately appealing to women. Women that we speak to at Women in Rail find that unconscious bias may be a factor against them entering the industry but also after they have been hired. Some feel excluded from conversations about male-dominated topics they can't relate to, albeit this is found to be an issue in every industry or business environment, and therefore can be lacking the confidence to push themselves forward for the roles they are interested in.

Ultimately this can end in their male colleague being promoted above them and reinforces the unconscious biases that one tends to hire people with the same hobbies and interests.

Eulogy

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A bias in an industry towards a certain gender or socioeconomic class can trigger a cycle that ensures it sticks, because intrinsically, our aspirations too tend to reflect the current norm. This means that with relatively few women working in the rail sector, we automatically associate the industry with men, just as we might associate the fashion industry with women. This means women's unconscious beliefs about the industry are holding them back from considering it as a profession.

Organisations have a responsibility to combat this. It starts with acknowledging unconscious bias, and putting programmes in place that help employees to acknowledge their own biases. It should also be considered throughout all company policies.

For example, parenting and work is an area rife with unconscious bias. Family life and its impact on working life is something that affects both men and women. However, a study by the EHRC recently found that around 54,000 new mothers or pregnant women are forced out of their jobs in Britain, because they are either dismissed, made compulsorily redundant where others in their workplace were not, or treated so poorly they felt they had to leave their jobs. Employers still believe that the responsibility of childcare will have a significant impact on women's ability to work- but no impact on men's.

To help to redefine these stereotypical gender roles, organisations should encourage fathers to take more parental leave, sharing caring responsibilities more equally.

Accenture, for example, has made it compulsory for all US and Canadian employees who return from either paternity or maternity leave to forgo travel for one year. The policy deliberately does not assume that only a mother wants to parent and saves both mothers and fathers, who often travel every weekday for their clients, the anxiety of having to ask for a reduction in their business travel.

To begin a real process of change, we all need to look at our own unconscious bias and move away from these potentially damaging beliefs. They come from within us and they need to be understood.

We must unlearn our current beliefs and relearn new ones. One of the best ways to eliminate a bias is to prove it wrong through personal experience and engagement. Draw on other people; engage in a conversation with someone different from ourselves. Get to know other people as individuals and take note of how they can dispel the biases we might hold.

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